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# **In Search of Identity:**

## **An Autobiography**

by

**Anwar el-Sadat**  
**(Rev. ed. 1992)**

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But to come to those who have become princes through their own merits and not by fortune . . . it will be seen that they owed nothing to fortune but the opportunity which gave them matter to be shaped into what form they thought fit; and without that opportunity their powers would have been wasted, and without their powers the opportunity would have come in vain.

- *Machiavelli*

The reasonable man adapts himself to the world: the unreasonable one persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable man.

- *George Bernard Shaw*

Either lead, follow, or get out of the way.

- *Popular Bumper-Sticker*

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### **Translator's Disclaimer and Note on Sources**

Following is an "excerpt" of the "1992 revised edition" of Anwar el-Sadat's In Search of Identity: An Autobiography. The material is based on the seminar readings: excerpts from the 1977 (original) edition of Sadat's book; Bard E. O'Neill, "The October War: A Political-Military Assessment," Air University Review, 25 (July-August 1974): 27-35; and Henry Kissinger, "Why We Were Surprised" from Chapter 11 in Years of Upheaval (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), pp. 459-461, 465-467.

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## The October War

I recall one starry evening well over a year before the October War, when I reflected on the conditions facing my people. We were a poor country, but worse, we were very demoralized. I gazed to the northeast for both the cause and the possible cure. There lay Israel, the state we had long vowed to drive into the sea. She, however, was the proud victor: as a culmination of her wars against us, she now stood upon our lands in the Sinai. Her occupation cost us economically; it was an obvious security threat; and every day it provided a taunting affront to our national pride. The Israelis believed territory provided safety and they were unwilling to enter meaningful negotiations. Neither our Arab brothers nor the world at large provided real support to us. My thoughts turned to the Soviets, who had become an unreliable ally. Looking into the night sky, I decided that despite everything, now was the time for my nation to reach for a new destiny.

Israeli military successes had created a false picture. Contrary to popular conception, they were not invincible and we were not inept. I had to win back honor and prestige for my people--not only in Egypt but throughout the Arab world. It would be necessary to inflict losses on Israel. The myth that

they were unbeatable had grown, but I knew the reality: Israel is a small country, little able to suffer a significant loss of soldiers, property, and equipment. I needed to affect the psyche of the Israelis to make them understand that territory alone provides no real security.

The 1972 summit conference between Nixon and Brezhnev had reinforced the superpower emphasis on detente. The practical effect for us was a dramatic reduction in Soviet support. At the same time, American backing of Israel was as strong as ever. My country had been reduced to a meaningless pawn in the balance of power game. The status quo was acceptable to Israel and now apparently also to the Soviets and Americans, but it was clearly intolerable for us.

I knew the United States had the capacity to be an effective mediator in the Middle East, but I had to convince the Americans it was in their interest to do so. At the time, the Americans had chosen to de-emphasize our area; they were preoccupied with such matters as Vietnam, detente, the opening with China, and the Watergate debacle. The United States was not willing to intervene against Israel to bring about a fair resolution of our dispute. Part of the reason, no doubt, was because they viewed my nation as a partner of the Soviets--a nation not to be helped.

For years, the Soviets had shown appreciation for our

friendship by providing substantial aid. They were especially helpful with military equipment and training. By 1972, however, their support had degenerated to a half-hearted responsiveness that was unacceptable. Even when they promised to provide certain weapons, deliveries were incessantly delayed. Many of the weapons that were finally shipped were not the ones we needed.

Ultimately, my disgust boiled over. In July 1972, I called in the Soviet ambassador and told him plainly that I refused to accept his nation's arrogant manner of dealing with us. I provided a deadline of one week for the 15,000 Soviet military advisors to depart my country. They could either take their aircraft and equipment when they left, or they could sell them to us. The Soviets met my deadline, taking most of their military equipment as they withdrew.

The Soviet departure worked to our benefit. They were not popular with my countrymen, and my expulsion order was widely praised in Egypt. Of course, the level of Soviet support had already markedly diminished, and I foresaw no likelihood of a return to the days of bountiful aid in any event. The perception that the Soviet departure meant we would not launch a military offensive was also important. In reality, we could not have initiated an assault while the Soviet advisors remained in country. I needed freedom of action to face the Israelis without

the limitations direct superpower involvement imposed. The decisions about my nation's security were for me to make and no consultation with or approval from any other country was needed.

I was able to secure an agreement with Hafez al-Assad for Syria to join us in a coordinated attack against Israel. By the fall of 1972, I moved to actual war planning, directing my war minister to flesh out the battle. He soon reported back that our forces would be ready even faster than I had requested. For my personal reassurance of our readiness, I convened the Supreme Council of the armed forces. As I feared in the back of my mind, I learned the war minister had lied to me. He had failed even to convey my plans to the proper military commanders! His real reason for the duplicity and failure to act: he was afraid to go to war. I replaced him with a war minister who had the proper attitude. Quickly, the new minister worked with the military on my plans for an offensive war. I was satisfied we had sufficient military power to achieve my goals.

Preparing the military was not enough. I also needed to improve our standing in the community of nations. Israel had been carved out of Arab lands following the Second World War. Her aggressive nature had been shown in 1957 and then most clearly by her cowardly attack in 1967. Other nations began to understand our position and to offer support. I could see the prospects for the virtual diplomatic isolation of Israel. As a

block, the third world countries denounced the continuing Israeli occupation of Arab lands. Most of the African countries were poised to offer significant diplomatic support. The traditional disputes among the Arab states also calmed, as all shared the goal of retaking the lands Israel had seized in 1967. I believed we would be able to take advantage of long-held plans to use oil as a weapon against Israel. The economic tool was an important adjunct to my military plans.

The seeds for diplomatic initiatives on many fronts had been planted. The coalition of support was unprecedented, but I knew it was fragile. I would have to move quickly to take proper advantage of the many favorable factors that were coalescing.

My ultimate goal was to regain the occupied lands. The issue was how to bring the pressure on Israel to achieve our objectives. Our backroom efforts to reach a settlement with the Israelis made it clear they viewed us with contempt; they believed we had neither the will nor the power to defeat them. They saw no reason to negotiate a fair agreement. Without a dramatic move on our part, Israeli leadership would not resolve the Sinai issue. I studied the situation objectively and realized that even the most intense diplomatic efforts would be fruitless. I decided to embrace Clausewitz: the political means of war would be used to achieve my psychological and diplomatic objectives.

What were the risks of war? Another military defeat by Israel would mean the end for me. Politically, I could not survive; my physical safety would also be at grave risk. An Israeli victory could potentially open the door for a Libyan military venture against my people. Despite all this, I was absolutely convinced that war was the right choice.

I needed to achieve at least initial military success. Even if the Israelis drove us back, I could foresee an eventual diplomatic victory. Surprise was essential. I made a number of moves to cause Israel to discount as a bluff my final preparations for war. The removal of the Soviet advisors had already bolstered the Israeli belief that we would not fight. My whispers to a European diplomat about "secret plans" to visit the United Nations in October were, as expected, dutifully conveyed to the Israelis. The Israelis simply did not believe I had a military option. They thought my aggressive speeches were empty rhetoric. They assumed I was merely playing out a war of words. In both May and August 1973, we engaged in large-scale military exercises that caused the Israelis to respond with full mobilizations. When we launched our October attack, Israel had seen all the signals but decided to save the costs of another mobilization.

The path was thus paved for our opening successes in the air and on the land. Following our early victorious battles, the

Americans provided massive aid to Israel, and they were able to prepare a counter-offensive. When the cease-fire came, however, we had taken back a portion of our Sinai that had been captured in 1967.

Our military efforts brought about the immediate restoration of Arab pride. We destroyed the myth of an invincible Israeli military. Israel began to realize that the temporary possession of our lands did not provide an eternal insurance policy. Support by my countrymen and also from our friends in the region and around the world helped us to meet our goals. The oil embargo was taking effect, and it clearly added pressure to help us reach our objectives. Of critical importance, our victory gave me the power to later pursue peace with Israel despite protests from our Arab friends. It was my people, after all, who had successfully fought the Israelis. We had earned the right to complete our military triumph with a favorable peace settlement.

The October War meant the superpowers would once again engage in the area. Their involvement in the war reinforced the image of the Middle East as a powder keg that could provoke a Soviet-American confrontation. The various diplomatic initiatives--including the oil embargo--caused the United States to move from its reflexive, blind support of Israel. I saw real prospects for the United States to mediate the peace process and force Israel to bargain.

In 1967, Israel showed the great value of seizing the initiative and utilizing the instruments of surprise and deception. We did the same in the October War--and victory resulted. We clearly understood, however, that no matter how great our military success, war was merely an instrument and not the end in itself. After I saw we had reached our objectives, we limited the suffering and casualties. That also helped us in later diplomatic efforts.

A nation cannot bargain when its opponent does not believe it has the power to escalate the stakes if necessary to enforce its will. Paradoxically, I went to war to make peace: until Israel perceived we had sufficient strength to pose a real threat, no peaceful resolution of our conflict was possible.

The complexity of my story should not obscure some simple truths. A leader must concentrate on a limited objective and then use all available means to achieve it. No strategy can be guaranteed, but once a good plan is chosen, diversions from the long-term goal can lead to failure. In the end, I had used virtually all the tools of statecraft in pursuit of my plan. The situation I had pondered that starry night may have seemed hopeless. I saw it as an opportunity. With some good fortune and the grace of Allah, we succeeded. The ultimate result validated my strategy.